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*The Study of Modern Literature in the Education of  
Our Time.*

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:—The invitation to address you this evening was not accepted without considerable misgiving, and nothing but the urgent solicitation of your Secretary could have induced me to appear before an Association whose professional pursuits are in many respects so different from my own. The daily round of my duties is so far removed from the “quiet and still air of delightful studies” which the scholar so much covets that it is not very easy to take up a subject which implies constant intercourse with the great masters of literature and an intimate familiarity with the college and university work of our time. At the same time I may venture to say that, while my labors have been almost wholly in the field of elementary education, I have not been unmindful of the important questions pertaining to higher education that have been so warmly discussed during the past quarter of a century. The question of educational reform touches schools of every grade, and no change can be made in any one department of school work without materially affecting all the others. While I beg of you to understand, therefore, that I shall speak of the points involved in this paper with great diffidence, what will be said may be taken as the result of careful observation and serious thought.

It would be difficult to find a stronger example of conservatism than the steadfast resistance of education to the changes which have been going on in almost every department of human activity for the past century. When modern education took its rise in the time of the Renaissance, it was inevitable that the studies prescribed for the schools should be based upon the ancient culture with which the new nations of Western Europe were then brought into contact for the first time. So overpowering was the revelation of beauty, of freedom, of nature, of the moral and intellectual dignity of man, contained in the literatures of Greece and Rome, that the best minds found in the classic poets, philosophers and historians, everything that

seemed needful for the highest cultivation of mind and heart. Even religion had to yield to the seductive charms of PLATO and CICERO, HOMER and VIRGIL, and for a while popes and cardinals busied themselves more with the teachings of the Academy and the legends of pagan mythology than with the doctrines of Christianity and the sufferings of the saints. As a knowledge of the civilization of the two great nations of antiquity was gradually unfolded by the researches and discoveries of the ardent scholars of Italy, an enthusiasm for culture in its noblest forms spread rapidly to the countries beyond the Alps, and within three or four generations, the intellect of Western Europe had been transformed from barrenness into fruitful activity; its social life had ceased to be mediæval, and had begun to take on those refinements out of which the graces and charms of modern manners have proceeded.

The schools, which up to this time had been wholly controlled by the Church and which taught nothing but a little barbarous Latin and a great deal of scholastic philosophy, were deserted by the youth, eager to drink at the fountains of the new learning which had been unsealed. A total reorganization of education became a necessity, and humanists and churchmen alike set to work to construct a curriculum based upon the classical writers, the study of which had become the occupation of the most enlightened minds and the inspiration of every worthy effort in the domain of literature and philosophy. The result was the schools of STURM in Germany, of COLET in England, and of the Catholic seminaries founded by the Jesuits to counteract the liberalizing tendency of Humanism. In these schools Latin and Greek were the chief studies. Save *The Divine Comedy*, no great literary work had been produced since VIRGIL. To the men of the fifteenth century, the classical writers contained the highest and best culture of which the human mind was capable, and they alone were considered worthy to train the intellect and form the taste. Latin was the only language which was deemed suitable for the expression of wisdom and eloquence; it was the medium of intercourse between the learned, and the chief business of the schools, therefore, was to make their pupils accomplished Latin scholars.

Now all this was natural enough. Where could the men of the Renaissance go to satisfy their sense of beauty and their desire for knowledge but to the master spirits who had set these

new aspirations and desires in motion? The newly-formed European nationalities were still in their infancy; their languages were just beginning to assume forms adequate to the expression of their intellectual and emotional experiences, and they found in the classical writers models which were calculated to excite their despair in proportion as they aroused their admiration. What we have a right to wonder at is that these nations, after they had grown to intellectual as well as political independence; after they had realized the power and beauty of their own languages; after they had created literatures abounding in the profoundest philosophy, the noblest poetry, the most persuasive eloquence, the fairest romance; after they had called into existence science with its deep insight into nature and its control of her mightiest forces; the wonder is, I say, that these nations should still have insisted that there was nothing in their own achievements which could satisfy the mind seeking for knowledge and beauty, and that their schools still continued to train the intellect and to stimulate the heart almost exclusively upon works, access to which was possible only after the prolonged and laborious study of the languages in which they were treasured up.

Fifty years ago the same condition of things existed substantially in the great schools of Europe. The education which they furnished was almost wholly classical. The Latin and Greek languages held their place as the only basis of liberal culture. It was impossible, however, that men could much longer remain satisfied with an education founded exclusively upon a culture that was developed and formed under conditions so entirely different from those upon which they now depended for their success and happiness in life. A consciousness of the changes which society had undergone took possession of the best minds. The new relations in which man stood to nature, the difference in his modes of thinking, and the greater depth and wider range of his feelings, had changed to a considerable extent his idea of culture, and a modification of the educational curriculum to meet the demands which had thereby been created was seen to be an absolute necessity. Little by little the stronghold of the classicists began to give way before the advance of the modern spirit. After a good deal of vigorous fighting, science was given a place in the schools; the study of history was extended so as to cover the modern development of

society, and by-and-by the modern languages were permitted to appear upon the courses of instruction.

But the controversy is by no means ended. With few exceptions, the classical languages still maintain their ascendancy in the leading schools of Europe and America, and an effort has recently been made in Germany to discredit the movement in favor of a more modern education, which has been in operation there for some time. In the United States, while a good deal of progress has been made, the ancient languages are, with two or three exceptions, still the back-bone of the college course. Elective studies are now a feature of the best schools, and liberal provision is made for science and modern languages; but no school has yet placed the modern upon a footing of perfect equality with the classical languages; and in the awards of academic honors and degrees, a discrimination is still made in favor of the old curriculum.

No careful observer can have failed to notice the confusion which has attended these efforts at reform. There can be no doubt that at present most people find it rather difficult to realize in just what a liberal education consists. We do not need to go far to find the cause of this uncertainty. While the schools have been moving forward in the direction of the new education and have been striving to bring their courses of instruction into harmony with the needs of our time, they have tenaciously held fast to the old order of things. The modern languages have been added to the curriculum, but Latin and Greek still remain. Such expedients as the elective and group systems have no doubt operated to prevent the worst results of this attempt to combine the new with the old from appearing as overpressure and as tending to the dissipation of the mental energies of students; but I venture the statement that a system so much at variance with right methods of study, sound scholarship and real culture, cannot last a great while. Sooner or later we shall have to abandon making the classics the staple of a liberal education. The glamour which blinded the minds of the scholars who first beheld the glory of the ancient learning has gradually been fading out, and the kindling fires of the new culture are lighting up the whole expanse of man's activities. The school course has meanwhile been passing through an organic growth, and the final outcome will certainly be a distinct and self-contained

scheme of education based upon the ripest achievements of the human mind in modern times.

It may be extremely rash to say this. To many, it will no doubt seem the rankest kind of Philistinism. Perhaps this is not the time and the place for the expression of such an opinion, but I feel that perfect candor is called for in speaking of a subject of so much importance. I may be allowed to state that I have come to this conviction from no disregard for the perennial worth of the ancient culture. I do not suppose for a moment that the classical languages will ever cease to be studied in our schools. I have the highest reverence for the masterpieces of literature which they have bequeathed to us, and I believe the time will never come when Athens will cease to be regarded as the greatest intellectual benefactor of mankind. I am sure I entertain as high a regard for classical scholarship as any one can who has not made it the business of his life. I must be frank enough to tell you, however, that my enjoyment of the classic writers has depended to a considerable extent upon following the advice of EMERSON: When I want to go to Cambridge I prefer to cross the bridge rather than swim the Charles river, and my impression is that in this respect I am no worse off than some of the most ardent champions of the classical system of education. I trust, therefore, that I shall not be understood as arguing against the classics as unworthy of serious study by those who feel drawn to them, or that I can for a moment believe that it is not incumbent upon every one who is seeking a liberal education to cultivate as close an acquaintance with them as opportunity may permit. My only contention is that the Latin and Greek languages have in our time no right to the supreme position which they have so long occupied in our education; and that the best modern literature has at least equal claims as a means of discipline and culture in the schools.

This is perhaps going a good deal farther than the general sentiment at present entertained respecting the reform of our higher education. It is now conceded that any scheme of instruction deserving of serious consideration must provide for the teaching of the modern languages. But, to my mind, there is a higher question involved in the discussion, and that is whether the modern languages open the door to those humanities which must always remain the chief object of liberal culture.

I am not concerned at this time with the philological value of the modern languages or with their merits as a means of mental discipline. The proceedings of this Association already show, aside from the extensive literature on the subject, that the principal modern languages afford ample opportunity for the exercise of the most searching scholarship; and there is abundant testimony as to their practical utility in cultivating that critical judgment which has been supposed to inhere exclusively in the ancient languages. Indeed, these are matters which I do not care to discuss before this audience. What I am desirous of showing is that the literatures of the modern world are entitled to the first place in the intellectual culture of our time, and should, therefore, be made the chief instruments of literary training in the schools.

The range of modern literature is so great that it is not easy to present an estimate of its intrinsic worth in the short space of time at my command. There are four authors, however, who may be taken as types of the highest reach of the modern mind in the domain of letters,—DANTE (if we may consider him as standing within the limits of modern history), CERVANTES, SHAKSPERE and GOETHE. In speaking of the permanence of literary fame, MR. LOWELL regards these writers as cosmopolitan because of the “large humanity of their theme, and of their handling of it.” Their works have been translated into all tongues, and have become part of the universal literature of mankind. They have stood the tests applied to the masterpieces of antiquity, but still they are not placed upon the same level in the schools. We are tempted to ask the reason why. If, as MR. MATTHEW ARNOLD tells us, the aim of our culture is “to know ourselves and the world,” we should certainly find in these mighty masters of the heart and its outgoings a knowledge of ourselves and the world. If the best means of reaching this end is to know “the best that has been thought and said in the world,” where shall we find such exhaustless wit and wisdom, with such power and variety in the expression of it, as in the works of the four men whom I have named? But when MR. ARNOLD comes to speak of the best that has been thought and said in the world, he falls back upon Greek and Roman literature as the only means of satisfying the ideal of culture; and in spite of all that has been gained in behalf of the modern

languages, I fear that this is still the opinion of most of those who have the guardianship of our higher education. When we have passed beyond the school and arrived at intellectual maturity, we go to *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet*, *Faust*, to gratify the finest traits of our being, and to find those aids which elevate and purify the mind. I cannot help thinking that these works can teach us more of ourselves and the world than the noblest efforts of the ancient writers, whose range of thought and experience was necessarily limited, as compared with their modern compeers. We need not deny to the Greek poets and thinkers that fortifying and elevating and quickening and suggestive power which MR. ARNOLD attributes to them, but they cannot minister to our need for conduct, to our need for beauty, as do the poets and thinkers of the times in which the conscience and taste of men were moulded by influences to which the ancients were strangers.

I have taken the leading representatives of modern literature as the strongest examples of what it can do for culture. But we need not stop here; there are many others with which the cultivated mind should keep companionship, and whose works may well find a place in the education of to-day. The highest ideal of culture may find material for training and growth in the strenuous virtues and lofty imagination of MILTON; in MOLIÈRE'S keen insight into human frailties, his depth of moral feeling and his overflowing laughter; in the manly freedom and intellectual courage, the fine critical faculty and the unconventional art of LESSING; in the humanizing influence of SCOTT'S romantic creations; in WORDSWORTH'S reverent worship of the eternal spirit of beauty which dwells in "air, earth and skies." The works of these men may not possess that perfection of form which characterizes the ancient classics; but they are fuller of refreshment and delight to one who is seeking for spiritual nourishment. But then we are told that the modern writers are deficient in those charms of style which constitute the chief attraction of the classics. I will not undertake to argue this question; but of this I am sure, that the cultivated mind need not perish for lack of beauty so long as it has fields so broad and inviting in which to roam. And is there not a little cant in a good deal that is said about the superiority of the ancient writers with respect to style? I find that very few of my classical friends slake their thirst for beauty at the Pierian spring.



As a general thing, they go to MILTON'S *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, and GRAY'S *Elegy*, and SHELLEY'S *Ode to the West Wind*, and WORDSWORTH'S *Sonnets*, and TENNEYSON'S *Idylls*. There are reasons obvious enough to the student of ancient history why the poetry of the Greeks, like their arts, stands apart from that of all other nations. No doubt their language had advantages which do not belong to the modern tongues, but the finest minds of the recent centuries have not wanted the means of giving fitting expression to their loftiest imaginings and deepest thoughts. The poems I have just named may lack the qualities which the classicist needs for his enjoyment, but they are filled with a gracious charm for the cultured mind of to-day which cannot be found in the choicest treasures of antiquity.

But there is such a thing as narrowness of taste in the matter of style. While we must have fixed standards, the attributes of which have been determined by the best literary judgment, I think it is possible to mar our culture by too close an adherence to the conventional canons of criticism. A good deal must be sacrificed in keeping within the limits with which the purists are constantly striving to hedge us in. If these censors had their own way, some of the most inspiring books which the world holds would be placed outside the pale of culture. It may exhibit a sad depravity of taste, but I should think that young man unfortunate whose training made him incapable of reading with profit the fiery declamation of CARLYLE or the impassioned eloquence of RUSKIN. These writers may be deficient in simplicity and repose, but they have that divine fire which kindles lofty thought and noble endeavor in the mind which gives them entrance.

So far, I have been discussing the claims of modern literature chiefly with reference to its power of satisfying the desire for beauty. If time permitted, there are other relations in which it might be presented that would, I think, help to justify its right to the chief place in the education of to-day. The more general diffusion of a correct taste, and the higher standard of culture among the educated classes that might be expected to follow placing the modern languages and their literatures in this position is a proposition which could be discussed with great profit. So, also, the question as to the deeper moral effect of modern literature as compared with ancient is one that would prove as

interesting as it is important to my argument. But I pass these to ask your attention for a moment to the historical relations of literature in modern times. If to know the world is an essential part of our culture, we must be conversant with the history of the events which have determined its progress; and I need hardly say that the events which stand most closely related to our own existence are the most important for us to understand. But the history of a nation is best read in its literature. DANTE's poem is the truest record of the Middle Ages which the whole world of books contains. SHAKSPERE is the only historian of the heroic period of English history. ROUSSEAU is the main impetus of that great revolutionary movement which left nothing untouched in its onward march—government, religion, manners, literature, education. WORDSWORTH and BYRON express the two tendencies which have been struggling for the mastery of English thought for half a century. GOETHE reveals in his many-sided culture all the characteristics of his age. TENNYSON reflects the doubts and aspirations, the broad humanity, the expanding progress of our own era. This is a mode of viewing literature which enables us to see how wide are its relations to real life. The more we can invest our culture with human interest, the more vitalizing will it become, and the earnest spirit which CARLYLE inculcates will take the place of that dilettanteism which is as enervating to the scholar as it is false to the true ideal of refinement. The education which does not aim to prepare for the active duties of life, which does not relate our culture to the work we have to do in the world, fails of its highest end. This is what GOETHE means when he says: "At last we only retain of our studies what we practically employ of them." I pray to be delivered from all narrowness, but I cannot avoid the conviction that the culture which is derived from the best that has been thought and said in the times that stand nearest to us, inheriting, as it does, all that is fairest and noblest in the achievements of the elder age, will be most likely to give us that type of manhood which the world has greater need of to-day than ever,—a manhood true, free, brave, humane, holding firmly to the best that the race has achieved in the past and pressing forward with unflinching faith to the ever-growing splendor which lies beyond.